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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the interdependence of schooling, work, and family in the lives of Mexican American women. Mexican Americans have lower educational achievement than other Hispanic subgroups and the total U.S. population, although females do somewhat better than males. Hispanic students are overrepresented in classes for special education, English as a Second Language, and bilingual education, and underrepresented in gifted classes. However, Hispanic students' representation in such classes and the nature of their school experiences in general have been shown to be influenced by the relative proportions of ethnic groups in the school, by Hispanics' relative socioeconomic status (SES), and by Hispanic representation on school board and faculty. Since most Mexican American women live in low-SES communities, their school experiences are likely to be negative. Nevertheless, Chicanas have recently shown some improvement in rates of higher education enrollment and completion. In 1993, about half of Mexican American females were in the labor force, located primarily in low-paying jobs with poor or inadequate working conditions and little job security. Mexican American culture does not value women's success in the labor market; working-class women are more likely than professionals to accept such cultural values. Many Chicanas describe high levels of ambivalence and stress over conflicts between motherhood and employment, and inadequate income and cycles of unemployment add to psychological distress. (SV)

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MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: SCHOOLING, WORK, AND FAMILY

ERIC Digest

By
Flora Ida Ortiz

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Mexican American Women: Schooling, Work, and Family

by Flora Ida Ortiz

THE BUREAU OF CENSUS (1994) reports there are approximately 13 million U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. Over 30 percent reside in the South and over 45 percent in the West. The lives of Mexican American women, wherever they reside, are affected profoundly by schooling, work, and family. This report shows the interdependence of these factors; changes in one affect the others.

Schooling

To begin our discussion, we examine two aspects of the schooling of Mexican American women: (1) persistent conditions affecting the quality of education they receive, and (2) evidence of improving achievement despite continuing challenges.

Mexican Americans are the least well educated group among Hispanics and the total U.S. population (Bureau of the Census, 1994). Comparisons of Mexican American males and females show slight recent increases in the educational achievement of females and a consistent trend of females doing better than the males. Carter and Wilson (1993) report high school completion rates of 47.8 percent for males and 57 percent for females during the 1990-91 school year, which is a decline for males and a slight increase for females.

However, the quality of education for Mexican American women nationally lags behind other groups. Meier and Stewart (1991) claim that the low quality of education for Mexican Americans is due to second-generation discrimination. They report that in "virtually all cases, Hispanics were overrepresented in situations with negative connotations and underrepresented in situations with positive connotations" (p. 162). These authors examined the relationship of minority representation on school boards to representation on administrative staffs and school faculties. Further, they examined the impact of these relationships on Hispanic student success. They found that Hispanics were more likely to be placed in classes for educable mentally retarded (EMR), limited-English proficient, and bilingual education than in classes for the gifted. The rate of Hispanic students assigned to trainable mentally retarded classes dropped as the enrollment of black students increased in the school. Likewise, rates of suspension and expulsion were related to the proportions of middle class Hispanic, black, and white students. As the proportion of low socioeconomic status (SES) black and/or white students increased and the proportion of middle-class Hispanic students increased, positive placement in classes, lower discipline rates, and greater high school completion rates were recorded for Hispanic students. The relationship between the SES of Hispanic students and representation among school board members, administrators, and teachers was also demonstrated. The higher the Hispanic SES and school board and staff representation rates, the more positive the Hispanic students' school experiences. Thus, because most Mexican American women are located in low-SES communities, their school experiences are likely to be negative.

The inadequate delivery of educational services throughout the K-12 period not only affects the academic preparation of Mexican American women, but, according to Reyes, Gillock and Kabus (1994, pp. 362-363), "by the end of their first year in high school, students' perceptions of caring and emotional support from both their families and schools" and social support from peers deteriorate significantly.

The data reflecting the improvement of Mexican American women's educational achievement are difficult to access because: (1) the data are collapsed under the rubric of Hispanic, and (2) the data are not presented uniformly in any one report. Carter and Wilson (1993) present data that show some improvement in higher education for Mexican American women. In 1991, among high school graduates, 39.1 percent of Hispanic women ages 18 to 24 enrolled in college, up nearly 10 percent from 1990. The rate for associate's and bachelor's degrees conferred improved 5.5 percent and 11.6 percent respectively for Hispanic women and 4.1 percent and 6.6 percent respectively for men. For Hispanics, the number of women earning master's degrees rose by 9.7 percent, compared with 7.2 percent for men. The number of Hispanic women receiving doctorates increased by at least 70 percent between 1978 and 1988 (Nieves-Squires, 1991, p. 5). Since 71 percent of the Mexican American population is under 35, compared to 54 percent of the U.S. population as a whole (del Pinal & DeNavas, 1990), these improved percentages are noteworthy.

In examining how Mexican American women fare in higher education, Nieves-Squires (1991, p. 6) wrote, "The isolation of Hispanic women [in graduate school] is compounded by the relatively small number of Hispanic persons of either sex, students, faculty members or administrators, who can serve as role models, mentors, colleagues and peers." Hispanic men represent 2.3 percent of students and women represent 2.7 percent. Hispanic women hold 1.2 percent of full-time faculty positions and 0.7 percent of administrative positions, while men hold 1.7 and 1.3 percent respectively.

Lango (1995) reports that only 1 percent of Mexican American women enroll in graduate programs, and these women tend to be assimilated into the mainstream dominant society. The factors affecting success appear to be Chicanas' perceptions of racism, sexism, economics, family responsibilities, support networks, role models, and mentors. Flores (1988) reported that single women are more likely to complete graduate programs than married women.

Work

In 1990, Hispanic females were employed in technical, sales, and administrative support positions in a major way (about 39 percent). Service occupations provided employment for about 24 percent of Hispanic females compared to 17 percent of non-Hispanic females (Bureau of the Census, 1993).

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The median family income for Hispanics was $25,064, compared to the median income of $35,225 for all Americans. The Mexican American female's median family income with female householder and no husband present is $12,714 (Bureau of the Census, 1993). In 1993, 51.9 percent of Mexican American females were in the labor force, while 11.4 percent were unemployed (Bureau of the Census, 1994). Tienda, Donato, and Cordero-Guzman (1992) describe how recessions have a greater impact on women of color and how education influences the effects of race and Hispanic origin. Due to lower educational attainment and limited skills, women of color tend to be located in low-level, more vulnerable work positions. Those positions cannot offer protection during a period of layoffs nor do they offer advancement.

Many Mexican American women bring to the work force skills they have gained through their experiences as wives, mothers, and community workers. Their skills include fund-raising, organizing neighborhood groups, and negotiating with authority figures, such as priests and city officials (Prado, 1991). These special skills, because they are unacknowledged and unapplied by employers, cannot improve the inadequate working conditions of Mexican American women: segregation by sex and ethnicity; impediments to the development of a work culture including harsh competition, high turnover rates, unfavorable immigration laws, labor restrictions, and protective legislation; and unions that have not accommodated Mexican American women in leadership positions (Soldatendo, 1991).

A woman's work identity pertains to the importance of paid labor in formulation of her sense of self. Mexican American culture does not place a high premium on using women's success in the labor market as a gauge for determining their worth as individuals. Pesquera (1991, p. 116) concludes that among females of working class origins, "family socialization serves to shape work attitudes and their behavior, whereas professional workers acknowledge the centrality of work identity and ideologically reject, in a somewhat ambivalent fashion, cultural expectations" (p. 116). Why working class individuals face barriers to establishing a work identity and shedding cultural expectations to a greater degree than professionals is an intriguing question.

Family

Many Mexican American wives and mothers work in the paid labor force. In those cases, wives highly valued the roles of wife and mother but leaned toward nontraditional sex-role attitudes, expecting their husbands to be flexible and assume some responsibility for housework and child care (Herrera & Del Campo, 1995).

About 70 percent of Hispanic families are maintained by married couples, about 9 percent by a male with no wife present, and 22 percent by a female with no husband present. It is reported that 23.4 percent of Mexican American families live in poverty.

Chicanas continue to describe high levels of ambivalence concerning the interplay between motherhood and employment (Segura, 1991). This may be because, as Flores-Ortiz (1991) reports, "blue collar workers' marital distress increased as they shifted away from a traditional value orientation with regard to gender roles" (p. 172). That is, these women struggled with the dilemmas that arose from trying to meet expectations of their families and their employers. For many women, there are two primary contributing factors to this tension: the work is similar in both settings (such as housework and other service jobs), and they occupy subordinate positions both at work and at home. Even those women who described "egalitarian relationships in their marriages" did not think their influence was equal to their husband's (p. 173). The gap between financial obligations and inadequate income is a major factor in the stress levels experienced by these women and their families (Romero, Castro, & Cervantes, 1988). Additionally, the cycles of unemployment—common in their types of jobs—sever social networks and decrease psychological well-being.

Conclusions

Mexican American women's schooling, work, and family are so highly interdependent that any changes in one affect the others. The importance of schooling includes providing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in work; providing the social context in which Mexican American women can learn to relate socially and personally to Anglo Americans; and improving the social position of the Mexican American woman.

However, as reported by Meier and Stewart (1991), the socioeconomic status of the Hispanic community has a strong bearing on political action to increase Hispanic representation at all school organization levels, thereby improving conditions for Hispanic students.

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